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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SLEIMAN SEES AOUN AS "DANGEROUS" AND
SYRIA AS BEHIND PRESIDENTIAL STALEMATE

REF: A. 07 BEIRUT 1959

[1](#)B. 07 BEIRUT 1979

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a 1/2 meeting with the Ambassador, LAF Commander -- and presidential front-runner -- Michel Sleiman came across as both bemused and exasperated by the presidential limbo. While skeptical that elections would occur on 1/12, he denied rumors he would pull out of the race. Dismissing positive signals he claimed to have received from Damascus, he believed the Syrians were behind Hizballah-Amal foot-dragging. Michel Aoun, "a dangerous man," wants violence on the streets, but Sleiman expressed confidence in the army's ability to confront unrest and remain united. Sleiman was contemptuous of what he saw as Aoun's attempt to use BG Francois Hajj's assassination politically. Yet he maintained that the USG should refrain from sanctioning Aoun. Describing a March 8-Aounist call on him, Sleiman revealed that Elias Murr was a sticking point: his visitors, calling Murr as a U.S. proxy, wanted Sleiman to veto Murr's participation in the next cabinet. Sleiman dismissed all proposed conditions, arguing that a consensus president should have sufficient cabinet weight to force consensus on reluctant political players. The French "made a big mistake" in playing with cabinet numbers with the Syrians. Yet, ultimately, "someone" is going to have to persuade the Syrians somehow that it is in their interest to see the presidential vacuum filled. Sleiman mused about a possible Saudi-Syrian understanding on the presidency, and he found Qatar's increased interest in him (that included an invitation to meet the Emir, which Sleiman turned down as inappropriate for a mere army commander) to be intriguing and promising. End summary.

"WHO MOVED MY CHEESE?" A GUIDE
TO WOULD-BE BAABDA PALACE RESIDENTS

[1](#)2. (C) On 1/2, the Ambassador met one-on-one for 75 minutes with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, who opened the meeting by joking about how "happy" the new year in Lebanon promises to be. Sleiman acknowledged that, while he was ostensibly

focused on his full-time job as army commander, this was not a particularly easy time for him. Grabbing a note card from his desk, he read in French two hand-written sentences that he said were helping to inspire and guide him during this transitional period. Both had to do with overcoming fear, and being guided by what one would do if one had no fear. Sleiman said that he jotted down these quotes from a French translation of the popular 1998 book by Spencer Johnson, "Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and Your Life." Read it, Sleiman urged; "I'll send it to you." With fervor, he said that he was recommending the book to all of his top commanders.

SLEIMAN NOT TO WITHDRAW HIS CANDIDACY

¶3. (C) After the two reviewed the sadly familiar state of play regarding presidential elections -- with Sleiman doubtful that "short of a miracle" presidential elections would occur at the next parliamentary electoral session on 1/12 -- the Ambassador asked about the rumors that he might withdraw his candidacy out of frustration over the political deadlock. Sleiman acknowledged he had heard the rumors but denied them categorically. "Why make it easy for them?" he asked (with the "them" clearly meant to be those blocking his election). Moreover, he laughed, since he himself never declared his candidacy, he had nothing to renounce.

HAJJ ASSASSINATION: AOUN EXPLOITING IT "SHAMEFULLY"

¶4. (C) Expressing condolences for the loss of one of his key generals, the Ambassador asked about the investigation into the 12/12 assassination of BG Francois Hajj. While noting that he had nothing new on the investigation, Sleiman

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acknowledged that he had intended to propose Hajj as LAF Commander, if Sleiman were elected president. Sleiman said that, undoubtedly, the assassination was meant as a message and warning to him. In fact, he said, he wondered if Hajj had been picked as a substitute when Sleiman proved to be a hard target. Sleiman noted that he had been traveling frequently to see commanders in their regions, going to south Lebanon only the day before Hajj's assassination. He had intended to spend the night there, but his security advisors, nervous about the exposure Sleiman would have in a tent and after being in one place for an extended period of time, persuaded him to return unscheduled to headquarters on the night of the 11th rather than the following day, when Hajj was killed. The army lost one of its best men, he lamented.

¶5. (C) Sleiman said that he had to work hard to build up morale within the LAF after Hajj's assassination. While the killing initially brought the army commanders closer together in shared grief, Michel Aoun, using some of his contacts in the LAF, had spread vicious rumors that, without countervailing work, might have divided the LAF. Michel Aoun whispered that Hajj was the real power and brains in the LAF, and he wondered how an assassination could take place in the heart of Baabda, presumably a secure environment, given its proximity to the Presidential Palace and to the Yarze LAF/MOD complex. The clear implication, spread within the LAF by some hard-line Aounists, was that Sleiman was negligent or maybe even involved.

¶6. (C) Sleiman commented that it was "shameful" of Aoun, once a military commander himself, to try to use Hajj's killing politically to weaken or destroy Sleiman. And everyone knows that Baabda is a "choufleur" ("cauliflower") region, he said pejoratively, with "all kinds of people" able to infiltrate the town from the nearby southern suburbs. Aoun "seems to have forgotten" that he was victim once of an assassination attempt in Baabda. In any case, Sleiman expressed belief that LAF unity remained strong, with even

the Shia officers disgusted by Aoun's attempts to block and weaken Sleiman. As an aside, Sleiman asked the Ambassador whether he had seen Aoun's "disgusting" New Year's Eve remarks about Maronite Patriarch Sfeir (in which Aoun admonished the Church to stay out of politics).

AOUN, A "DANGEROUS MAN,"
INTENDS VIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS

17. (C) Warming up to his theme, Sleiman then declared Aoun a "dangerous man." While saying that we needed to monitor what Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah will signal in his televised address tonight (1/2), Sleiman said that he believed Aoun's intentions were to spark street demonstrations that Aoun intended to become violent. "He is crazy," Sleiman said, wondering why anyone would want to throw a match into the puddle of gasoline that is Lebanon today. Answering his own question (and using the example of potential violent protests against the U.S. Embassy), Sleiman said that Aoun believes that, by destroying Sleiman's reputation by putting the army in an untenable position (i.e., protection of the Embassy at the cost of attacking demonstrators), he promotes his own presidential ambitions. Sleiman expressed confidence that LAF unity would remain strong and that the LAF would respond decisively and effectively to any violent protest, including against the Embassy. "Don't worry," he said. Moreover, if Hizballah (worried about Sunni-Shia clashes) is not enthusiastic, then Aoun will not be able to pull off any significant demonstrations, since Aoun's Christian followers will not want to clash with the army.

18. (C) The Ambassador noted that he would see Aoun this week. What was Sleiman's advice in dealing with him, given his dangerous and irrational inclinations? Sleiman said to be "firm" about our views of destructive street behavior, but (as he has before) he advised against explicit threats. While the USG might respond to actual provocation with sanctions, Sleiman suggested passing such warnings via Aoun's MPs and advisors rather than to Aoun himself, lest he publicly claim U.S. blackmail. "He has, what do you call it?" Sleiman asked, searching for a phrase but resorting to French, "complex de persecution" that he uses to build

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populist support.

19. (C) Sleiman suggested as well that the Ambassador attempt to make Aoun squirm a bit by talking of how much Aoun and Sleiman have in common -- army background, concern over the Christian future in Lebanon, desire to stop corruption, etc. -- in an attempt to get Aoun to articulate why he wouldn't trust Sleiman to hold the cabinet balance in his hand and to decide who should be the next army commander. Those details are all smoke, Sleiman argued, disguising the fact that Aoun can't accept Sleiman as president. Isn't it strange, Sleiman mused, how much in common arch-rivals Samir Geagea and Michel Aoun actually have: both of them see Sleiman as the biggest risk to their own popular standing, since Sleiman, more than lackluster candidates like Michel Edde, will attract Christians who are looking for a third-way political leader. (See ref B for Sleiman's discussion with A/S Welch and DAPNSA Abrams about his thinking about how the Christians need someone else besides Geagea and Aoun as leaders.)

MARCH 8-AOUNIST MEETING WITH SLEIMAN:
RED LINE AGAINST ELIAS MURR

110. (C) Sleiman noted that March 8-Aounist delegation had recently visited him, including Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh, Aoun's advisor (and son-in-law) Gebran Bassil, Amal's Ali Hussein Khalil, and Hizballah's Hussein Khalil. While claiming to support and like the commander, the group

had tried to impose conditions on a Sleiman presidency. Sleiman claimed to be shocked by the attempted veto, articulated most forcefully by Franjieh, against the return of Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr to any cabinet position. They argued that Murr is too close to the Ambassador and has become a tool for the implementation of U.S. policy in Lebanon. Sleiman said that he pushed back, challenging the group to say whether they had a problem with the army's performance over the last two and a half years. When told no, Sleiman said that the army's performance is linked to Murr's direction.

¶11. (C) Franjieh persisted, asking for a commitment from Sleiman that he would veto a new Murr appointment. Sleiman asked Franjieh what his reaction would be, should Saad Hariri ask Sleiman now for a commitment that he would veto any Franjieh ministerial slot. The Ambassador noted that what Franjieh says is usually thought to reflect policies in Damascus, given the close relationship between Franjieh and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Nodding, Sleiman said that the Syrian-Aounist-Hizballah concern about Elias Murr is linked to their fear that Murr could become Minister of Interior overseeing the next legislative elections. Given that March 8 and Michel Aoun intend to destroy the March 14 majority once and for all in those elections, they will insist on having the Ministry of Interior. As for Murr, the March 8-Aounists would probably accept Murr remaining in the cabinet, Sleiman speculated, as long as his position was not important.

REJECTING THE BLOCKING THIRD

¶12. (C) Asked what other conditions his visitors had tried to impose, Sleiman said that they had insisted on at least 11 ministers in a 30-member cabinet (giving them the blocking third). Sleiman repeated his arguments that he will not agree in advance to yield on the presidential prerogatives to decide, with the PM-designate, on the composition of the cabinet. But he also asked his visitors why they needed the blocking minority, if Sleiman had a significant share of ministries himself. "Don't you trust me?" he claimed to ask his visitors. Gebran Bassil ("an awful man!") argued that the Hariris have the habit of bribing ministers to get them on their side, a comment that caused Sleiman to "explode": "If I have five, six, or seven ministers, you think I'll only pick people who can be bought?" Sleiman said that he told Bassil that he would appoint his son, son-in-law, and daughter to ministerial slots in that case, and he dared Bassil to accuse the Sleiman family of corruption. Bassil was taken aback but did not retreat, Sleiman said.

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¶13. (C) As he had with NEA A/S Welch and DAPNSA Abrams (ref B), Sleiman said that he envisioned a cabinet with 13 ministers for March 14, ten ministers for March 8, and seven ministers for him. If people want a consensus president, they need to allow the president to have the tools, by cabinet weight, to force consensus. The Ambassador noted that, assuming a split between March 14 and March 8 on a decision, March 8 would need the support of only one of Sleiman's ministers to block major decisions, whereas March 14 would need to get all seven Sleiman ministers on its side to get major decisions approved. Even for minor decisions requiring a simple majority, March 14 must persuade three of Sleiman's ministers to agree. The Ambassador asked Sleiman whether Saad Hariri agreed with a formula that seemed to lean in March 8's direction. Smiling, Sleiman said that it was his opening position. For now, he was sticking with his basic position that all of this can be decided only after presidential elections, lest presidential powers be weakened.

FRENCH "MISTAKEN" IN DISCUSSING CABINET WITH SYRIA,
YET SYRIA BEHIND THE CURRENT IMPASSE

¶14. (C) The Ambassador asked Sleiman what, in his analysis, was the core of the problem. Six months ago, the Ambassador noted, most people assumed Syria would be thrilled with Sleiman as president: what happened? Sleiman laughed, "you didn't trust me then, and they did." Now, Sleiman said, the Syrians do not trust him, in part because of Nahr al-Barid: no one in Damascus thought the LAF sufficiently capable or the LAF leadership sufficiently courageous to pursue the Fatah al-Islam fight to the end. Now the Syrians look at the LAF and at Sleiman differently, even though during the battles Sleiman pointed out publicly that the connections between Fatah al-Islam and the Syrian regime were far more modest than March 14 argued. Although friends in Damascus as recently as ten days ago sent him assurances that he would be president, Sleiman, initially encouraged, now believes that they were lying.

¶15. (C) Regarding Syria, the French "made a big mistake" in engaging the Syrians on cabinet allotments, Sleiman said. If the French wanted to engage Syria, fine, but they should not have given the Syrians the impression that Damascus has control over cabinet composition. Asked what a constructive policy toward Syria would be, Sleiman said that "someone" needs to talk to the Syrians. The Syrians need to see either from pressure or from reassurances that filling the presidential vacuum is in their interest; now, the Syrians see more advantages to the vacuum. Maybe, Sleiman mused, the Saudis could talk to the Syrians about the presidency. That would give the Syrians something -- a dialogue, however limited -- with the Saudis, in return for presidential elections in Lebanon. The Ambassador expressed skepticism, noting that the Saudis seemed to be in no mood for such a dialogue. "Don't be so sure," Sleiman said; "I've heard something is going on (in Arabic) 'under the curtains.'" If so, the Ambassador predicted, the same thing could easily happen as occurred with the French: the Syrians seduce the Saudis into talking of things that should be left exclusively to the Lebanese.

¶16. (C) In closing the meeting, Sleiman noted that the Qataris have recently increased contacts with him, unexpectedly. This gave him some hope that the presidency might be resolved, since the Qataris are presumably acting in coordination with the Syrians. The Qataris extended him an invitation to meet with the Emir, he said, but he turned it down as inappropriate for an army commander. Seeing the Ambassador's quizzical look, Sleiman claimed that his audience with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak a couple of months ago was different: he wasn't then anyone's nominee for president, and he was on an official visit to Egyptian security officials who then set up the Mubarak meeting.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) A growing number of people -- Elias Murr, Walid Jumblatt, Fouad Siniora, Nayla Mouawad -- are expressing concern that Michel Sleiman's candidacy is doomed. They cite the increased difficulties (now that the parliamentary

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legislative session has ended) in getting through the necessary constitutional amendment, and they fret about the conditions March 8-Aounists are trying to impose on a Sleiman presidency. Nevertheless, March 14 is sticking with Sleiman, in hopes of finding a solution before the January 12 legislative session. Sleiman himself seemed relatively relaxed, and we did not have the impression that he has given up. While his speculation about the possibility and benefits of a Saudi-Syrian rapprochement was a bit off, his analysis struck us as otherwise sensible and balanced. Whatever reservations we had about his role as army chief, he has impressed us in his role as a presidential candidate. In a sense, what initially struck us and others as a strange idea -- that March 14 nominate Michel Sleiman -- seems to have

worked almost too well: while Aoun's problem is always his own ambitions, Syria's Lebanese allies no longer seem to trust someone long considered to be one of their own. Given his political desires to forge a new Christian alliance between Aoun and Geagea, Sleiman personally is in a win-win situation (assuming he's not eliminated physically): he either becomes president somehow, or, even if he does not, he enters political life with lots of popular support and respect as well as heightened political profile.

FELTMAN